



## **The Group Journal**

Thailand Immersion Trip 2011

Edited by Sarah Kim  
Southeast Conference, United Church of Christ

*The Journalists – in alphabetical order*



Greg Carey



Emma Chatmon



Kathy Clark



Regina Drake



Maxine Ervin



Jennifer Fair



Don Fenestre



Raylena C. Fields



Susan Fritz



Charmaine Johnson



Sarah Kim



Andrea Mai



Gail Minnick



Delores Owens



Pat Spears



Jowanna Tillman



Bryant Woodford

**Greg Carey**

Our second full day in Chiang Mai, a Sunday, provided the opportunity to visit the First Church of Chiang Mai. It's a beautiful structure, open to the air. The worship service is very much like a Presbyterian or UCC service back home, with many of the same hymns. It's very much in the legacy of the missionaries who brought Christianity to Northern Thailand. The church does have an orchestra to accompany the singing.



One person in our group commented how lost she was during the service, except that at crucial points like the Doxology "we were all one." That oneness is evident in the welcome we received. The sermon was based on Matthew's story of Herod murdering the innocent children in hopes of killing the

Messiah. The preacher told us that Jesus' survival demonstrates how God is in control of all things. She then moved on to apply that lesson to our lives, maintaining that no matter what trials we're enduring, we should take courage and find comfort because God is in control.

To be honest, I don't really agree with that message. I wondered, "If God is in control, then where was God for all those babies Herod is supposed to have slaughtered? What does that say about God?" I suspected that our host, Mark Tamthai, might not have agreed either, so I asked him about it. He shared that for most of his adult life he's experienced something of an uneasy relationship with Thai churches, knowing that his point of view is often in the minority. Yet faithfully Mark continues to participate and minister in the life of the church. And the church continues to accept and seek out his work. I admire that.

The afternoon offered free time. Some of us went out for Thai massage, while others went shopping. After dinner tonight, still more shopping awaits as we'll visit Chiang Mai's Sunday Night Bazaar.

**Greg Carey**

We're getting settled into our routine now. This morning began with a classroom session. Mark Tamthai began to explain his understanding of peacemaking. (The conversation continues tomorrow morning.) Mark has been engaged at a global level and particularly with conflict transformation in Southern Thailand.

Mark distinguishes between conflict resolution (short-term, concrete steps to end violence) and conflict transformation (a deeper, longer-term approach to learning how to live together). It is not so much that he prefers one over the other; rather, some situations are so acute that they require conflict resolution before the work of transformation can set in.



Mark's major point is that peacemaking requires deep engagement with people's cultural realities and stories. It cannot simply be a matter of addressing "issues." This is so because most violence results primarily from emotional injury rather than economic or physical harm. Transforming such situations requires significant cultural understanding, and that takes work. Also, one cannot work on peace issues without addressing justice concerns.

In the afternoon we visited Chi, a young Karen (Kuh-RIN) Christian who is building a Foundation for the Preservation of Indigenous Wisdom. Chi related how Christian, then Buddhist, than Thai government interventions have undermined Karen cultural structures and values, leaving people fragmented and dependent. He did so in



large part by sharing traditional stories along with songs he has composed on a beautiful stringed instrument made by his father. Among other things, Chi and a few others are working to develop an indigenous Karen Christianity, but these conversations are at an early stage. Chi is aware that other Christians around the world are working on similar movements, but he's just getting started.



**Emma Chatmon**

“To be or not to be,” to be awake or to be asleep, that is the question. Or is it, because it is 4:00 a.m. and I am awake and cannot return to sleep. It is too early for that lovely voice of the sweet bird singing outside our window. My roommate is also awake, so we discussed the day before.

The idea of one’s culture being a cage for one’s life was the focus of our discussion. We concluded that if God made all of us with a free will, but at the same time created us for God’s glory—according to our scripture—with God’s words already in our hearts, each with a desire for God. Does everyone in this world feel this desire for a higher power and can choose to or not to obey? Or are we all created in God’s image? That is the question.

Devotional:

*Prayer - God we thank thee for the night and the pleasant Morning light, for rest and food, and loving care and all that makes the world so bright. Help us to do the things we should to be kind and good to others in all we do and all we say, to grow more loving every day.*

Scripture - *John 13:33-38 (If not now, when)*

Thought for Today - *Our greatest comfort is to know that God is in control.*

*Not so in haste, my heart!  
Have faith in God, and wait;  
Although He seems to linger long  
He never comes too late. –Torrey*

Our breakfast is always served buffet style in a special area set up just for us with a sign-in sheet and a sign indicating our group. Many of the Payap students have commented, “They are taking very good care of your group; you should see what they are serving us.” The dining hall is set up very well, the food is delicious, and the presentation comes off excellently. We have noted that here, there is not



a lot of waste. Many of our dishes are served over in a different fashion, maybe a casserole, etc. They are always done very well and executed beautifully to taste. Today we have cereal, milk, juice, fruit, ham, tomatoes, cucumbers, eggs, rice casserole and noodles, toast, two kinds of jelly, butter, more juice, coffee and tea.

When we arrived at the institute this morning, the atmosphere was full of smiles and laughter, because of our Norman—the gnome that is traveling with us. The language included the life with him and the great possibilities in having him in one's life. I had stepped out of the classroom for a minute. Upon my return, Don was giving Norman a new home. Earlier today, I had said to myself, "Surely one would not give me Norman this morning because I am journaling today." Well, to my amazement, today of all days, yes, I was presented with Norman. The group assured me that Norman would add greatly to my life and he would also help me with my task for the day.



Ajaan Mark Tamthai continued his discussion of Conflict Transformation and Peace-building Part II and presented his case study of peace in Southern Thailand. He gave a brief review of the history, the start and cause of the conflict, the parties involved and the ones who are affected the most, the reasons that it continues, and the many different attempts to resolve the problems.

If only each group could walk a mile in the other's shoe, and put themselves in each other's life for a while. Stop and smell the roses, it doesn't matter who is right or wrong, or who is in charge, let's just work for peace and unity that we all may be one. We are all different, but let's celebrate our differences and agree to disagree and make life peaceful for all God's children. Yes, dream on! Ajaan Mark ended with a lovely song about where we are going today.



The time seems to fly by very fast. We left our home away from home--the International House at Payap University—for an adventurous journey to Mae Sot near the Thai/Burma Border. This is four and a half hours southwest of Chiang Mai. Our travel was on two excellent, very comfortable white vans. There were nine of us in each van including Ajaan Mark's

son Jason, who was our guide. “Rolling, rolling, rolling, was the song we sang as we wound our way up the mountain. Throughout this electrifying experience (we were warned not to look at the on-coming traffic because of the riveting way the cars move and wave in Thailand; it really seemed as if we were headed for a collision any minute), we were able to view a very beautiful scenery of the countryside in spite of the overcast sky. The sun only peeked out once during our trip. The journey reminded me of traveling in rural hills of Georgia, Tennessee, or one of the Carolinas. There were farm areas, homes, spirit houses, temples, businesses, hospitals, golf and resorts areas, and gas stations. During our restroom breaks, we encountered Asian toilets that were well constructed in ceramic. I think I have become accustomed to them because I don’t like sitting on public facilities, anyway.

The darkness of the evening finally arrived as we came into the Wattana Village Resort. From what we could see it was a lovely western resort with a large conference center. Even in the dark the landscape was magnificent. We had ten rooms on our floor and a large porch for group meetings which we used for our group processing that night. The resort was constructed in a very nice wooden structure.



The accommodations were very spacious and had all of the amenities of home. The generous staff provided us with a wonderful dinner served of rice, stir fried pork and ginger, stir fried broccoli (vegetarian), mild soup with cucumber and tofu (vegetarian) and lots of sauces, as well as green curry with chicken. We also enjoyed fruit and water. In the gorgeous dining hall, each of us was able to dine and calm down from the trip with great anticipation for getting a good look at what seemed to be a lovely place in the day light in the morning.



### **Raylena Church Fields**

By accident of alphabet, my date to journal events of our incredible journey to and around the Kingdom of Thailand fell on the fifth day of our adventure. My expectations of the trip would again be exceeded.

We awoke at a lovely mountain resort (the Wattana Village Hotel), ironically, after having driven by van the night before, about four hours southwest of Chiang-Mai to a city called Mae Sot on Thailand's northwest border with the rogue regime of Burma. Here the headlines of two summers' past would meet reality. I remembered being horrified at cell phone videos (the new tool of revolution) of saffron-robed monks being tear-gassed by goose-stepping Burmese riot police. We were going into a camp of thousands of Karen Burmese refugees—a no-man's land between a home government bent on their destruction and a foreign one chilly to the idea of extending too much friendship, let alone citizenship with full civil rights. We were about to witness the results of this particular ethnic conflict—just one of many circling the globe—and get the lesson that no matter how much you want to, you cannot solve every problem and you have to do what you can, but still live your own life.



Despite of, or perhaps with the help of the operatic rooster who blared away outside the window of my lovely room complete with a western flush (thank you God) toilet, I recognized the luxury and lavishness that comforted me at this resort, just miles away from a sprawling refugee camp. Mental note was made – “But for the grace of .....” The building we stayed in reminded me of a line of staterooms aboard a luxury ship in a movie. It looked to me like something Howard Hughes might have owned. But,



I am big on imagination. The all wooden floors, doors, and walls were polished and gleaming. Outside, the property was gorgeous – complete with ponds and swimming pools. It being Thailand, the vegetation was lush and the flowers and waterfalls invited meditation.

After breakfast we were back on what would become, jokingly, our



notorious van, for a day of experiences that would see our emotions peek in the excitement of just being in beautiful Thailand and plummet given the enormity of the Burmese refugee crisis.

We drove over to a house in what appeared to be a moderate-income neighborhood. Inside it was starkly different from what western eyes would call middle-class. Another respectful adjustment was made instantly by the group. It turned out to be the Burma Issues Office. Inside waiting for us was a team of impressive and even brave professional social activists led, in part, by a man we called Saw Mort. At least he was our guide for the day along with Jason Tamthai. Mr. Mort is Karen as are most of



The people who live in the camps. To ready us for the trip to the camp, Mr. Mort's group showed us videos, and offered statistical reporting designed to provide the scope of the refugee crisis. He focused also on what he called IDP's or Internally Displaced Persons—Karen living everyday on the run from regime soldiers inside Burma. These are determined people who refuse to become refugees. So, they run. They pick up what little they have and live in the wilderness, wherever they can hide from the military. The Burma Issues workers courageously make forays into these places, helping to get aid and books to them. They expressed an ironclad commitment to educating the people, maintaining, even after more than two decades of assault, that freedom will come and they want the population of IDP's to have an education and be able to capitalize on freedom when it arrives. Talk about utter faith and hope in the face of destruction!

Of course, many have become refugees inside Thailand. Who knows which is the better choice? All of us, it was plain to see, were having trouble just taking in the magnitude of the Karen crisis. We discussed resettlement as it is seen through the eyes of Karen who, in that solution, are left behind in Thailand and other places. A few of us in the group have been on the receiving end, helping new refugees settle in the U.S. Now we got to hear another side, see resettlement to the states through the eyes of the Karen activists like Saw Mort. They have a different view. Those who resettle tend to be the best educated and most highly trained who had given up on the idea of freedom and home inside their own land and pursue a better life for themselves and their children today. For the justice workers, this is a serious brain-drain. More fundamentally, for some, it is betrayal. Others, like Saw Mort, visit friends and relatives in America and return to Thailand and the cause.

The most striking experience of the day, for me, was our visit to the Border Clinic. Thailand is known for its medical tourism industry and thus in Chiang-Mai and in Bangkok, and likely other cities, there are state of the art facilities and care. That is not the picture here. The miracle is that the busy clinic exists at all. We were led across a sprawling courtyard encircled by a battery of medical offices from patient check-in, to x-rays, to entries to various wards. I thought it a modern day MASH unit, scrambling in the wilderness on this mountain to bandage the wounds of war—just trying to keep up.



Here essential lifesaving and life sustaining medical services are provided for the refugees in conditions that the staff was so proud of but that actually brought me to tears for the first time on the trip. I was struck by the number of stray dogs covered with mange that just wandered freely around the clinic. There was, or appeared to be, an open sewage trench that encircled the complex and, again to me, there hung sourness



in the air. Yet, people were smiling – so glad for the facility; and trained medical professionals were giving their souls to their work.

At this facility, your family has to bring you your food and you bring your own bedding. But there are also gardens on the property to grow fruits and vegetables.

My respect for the Thai culture and my sense of self-protection clashed. I could not remove my shoes to enter the various clinic departments our guides so proudly wanted to present. I stood back, concerned about hygiene, kept my shoes on, observed, respectfully, from just outside the doors.



As I said, I found myself in tears. I felt so inept for not having the kind of solutions in hand that would improve all of this. Stepping over one of the sewage trenches, I walked away with Charmaine, my new friend from Atlanta, who was having trouble with what we saw as well.

Soon we were again “on the bus.” There was more to learn. But we carried with us DVDs about the “Burma Issues” campaign and artwork from IDP children, all purchased to help contribute to the effort to sustain people until peace be forged out of madness and greed.



**Kathy Clark**

*"A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping,  
Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted,  
because they are no more."*

Jeremiah 31:14-16

I can't remember whose idea it was that each of us keep a journal of one day of our journey together, but I think it was probably Sarah's. I believe it is a brilliant idea, a way to corporately capture our experience and give each of us a voice in the collection of stories and memories. While I tend to take excellent notes when travelling, I unfortunately have a difficult time keeping up with what day and date it is while I am in another country—especially one that is on the other side of the international dateline from my country of origin. As a result, while I had copious notes, I wasn't sure which ones reflected the day I was assigned to journal. So I wrote Sarah an email, and, in her blessedly organized, clear, and succinct manner, she responded with the following:

*Jan. 13 was the last day in Mae Sot. In the morning we drove to the Refugee Camp on the border; made some purchases at the K.W.O. Shop (Karen Women's Organization); stopped by the children's school where Steve Gomersall from England made a presentation about his experience with the school (you also met the principal and gave her our gift of school supplies); and we had a quick bite (fried rice that was like a side dish in portion) before heading back to Chiang Mai on that winding, dangerously hilly highway.*

Really, that just about sums it up, doesn't it? Well, yes and no. January 13<sup>th</sup> was a day where the facts of what we did simply do not capture in any way the fullness of the experience. Honestly, I am not sure any words can capture the fullness of the experience for me. It was, beyond a doubt, the day that had the greatest impact on me during our trip.



Passing by the Mae La Refugee Camp outside Mae Sot, a town that lies along the border between Thailand and Burma, these images and thoughts passed through my mind:

Glistening sunlight reflecting off leafed roofs.

Familiar looking palm trees in an unfamiliar landscape.

Thatched huts standing shoulder-to-shoulder, against looming sheer cliffs, like backs against a wall.



Colorful laundry hung out to dry—incongruously—over barbed wire fences.

A world apart—accessible only through armed checkpoints.

A place defined by insiders and outsiders.

Where is God in this?

Against the side of a sheer cliff backed by a nearly impassable mountain range, lies a city made of sticks and leaves, flesh and blood, resignation and hope, all encircled by an inhospitable barbed wire fence. The occupants are not supposed to leave without permission and few outsiders, mostly faithful and committed members of Non-Governmental



Organizations (NGOs), are allowed in. What was meant to be a temporary refuge has become a “no person’s land,” a place on the borderland, that seems to exist not in time and space but in the time and spaces in between the rest of reality. It is a place that time has forgotten, as has most of the rest of the world.



Saw Mort, the young, apprentice peace builder whom we met, and Jason Tamthai, a young artist who works with artists inside the refugee camp in Mae Sot, served as our hosts and guides. They took us in our comfortable, air conditioned vans to a spot near the camp from which we could see inside.

Saw Mort is himself a Burmese refugee who lived for 20 years in a camp inside Thailand. There are tens of thousands of refugees from Burma living in Thailand, some legally and some not. Most of them leave their own country because they are members of ethnic minorities, such as the Karen hill tribe, that are being systematically persecuted by the military regime of Burma. Most of these ethnic minority communities live in the mountains in small farming villages.

For over 25 years, the Burmese government has been sending in the military to burn these villages and to plant land mines in them so that the people cannot come back. The villagers are then forced to go deeper and deeper into the mountains, constantly resettling, only to have their villages burned again. It is not a story of outright genocide, but it is a story of persecution and oppression, in an effort to weaken the resistance to the military dictatorship and strip people of their ethnic identity.



Many try to stay in their homeland, but many also find their way to Thailand, seeking refuge. Refugees from Burma have no legal status in Thailand. They cannot work, they cannot have access to health care, their children cannot attend school. They live in the middle of now and not yet, waiting and hoping first for the chance to return home safely and in peace, or, if that is not possible, to resettle in Thailand, or, barring either of these circumstances, to resettle in a third country, such as the United States. To be a refugee is to have lost just about everything you once held most dear and to live as an uninvited “guest” in a land that is not your own. But to be a refugee is also to have survived, which is no mean feat under these very dire circumstances.



The camps were intended to be temporary, but twenty five years later, a whole generation has been born and grown up in them. The one room huts in which whole families live are only intended to last three to five years. There is little way to make one's livelihood, short of weaving the beautiful cloth and creating crafts that the Karen Women's Organization and others sell on behalf of the residents. They depend almost completely on NGOs to provide them with food, materials for shelter, and systems for infrastructure, such as schooling and waste management. Yet, in spite of the seeming hopelessness, the people are self-governing, electing their own section leaders, building their own residences and community buildings, distributing their food, educating their own children, settling their own conflicts, attending to the ill, and gathering for worship in indigenous, Buddhist and

Christian congregations.

But how long is temporary? As I asked myself that question, I thought about the spiritual discipline of learning to live in the moment. Even as that thought entered my mind, I realized that living in the moment is a far cry from being unable to imagine a future. Where is hope? Where is God?

Hope – and God – are found in the will to survive and imagine a future for one’s children, if not for oneself. Hope and God are found in the hands of the “outsiders” who come into the camps to stand in solidarity and work for justice with and on behalf of the world’s forgotten ones. Hope and God are incarnate in people like Saw Mort and Jason Tamthai. Hope and God rely on us who have borne fleeting witness to this reality to tell the story and call upon the rest of the world to stand in solidarity and work for justice for these, our brothers and sisters, our neighbors, ourselves.



As Sarah noted, we ended the day journeying back to Chiang Mae over what seemed like a dangerously winding, hilly highway, a mere shadow of a metaphor for the journey the Burmese refugees take. If our journey, careening between cars and trucks with just inches between us and calamity, caused us any amount of anxiety or fear, imagine what it must be like to make that trek over the mountains by foot, carrying one’s remaining meager possessions, vulnerable to the soldiers and the elements, only to end up in a place that holds no future. May we never forget what we have seen. And may God help us to discern what we are called to do to promote peace and justice in Burma and for the Burmese in Diaspora.

May those who weep and mourn be comforted, and may their children once again come home.



Regina Drake

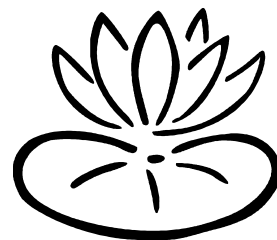
An ancient cantor,  
A wail across the ages  
Calls us to prayer—  
It speaks of our condition  
Needing God,  
Wanting Spirit.  
We come,  
Moving in ancient ways--  
Speaking the universal tongue,  
Dissonant like a Mississippi blue note  
Familiar like a hymn, raised--  
We come  
To prayer.

God waits for us  
Around the world,  
As we disengage  
From working,  
From playing,  
From the struggles  
Of this life—  
God waits for us  
To quiet ourselves—  
To listen  
And hear.

We are late often—  
Rushing in  
From life  
To Life—  
We come  
On motorcycles  
Or on foot—  
In robes or  
In blue jeans—  
With hijab  
Or bare heads.  
We stand  
Shoulder-to-shoulder  
Before One.

Men here,  
Women there--  
We kneel,  
We bow,  
We pray--  
We say:  
Allah is God  
And Mohammad is  
God's messenger!  
The Shahada  
Is sweet  
In our mouths,  
Warm on our lips.

All praises to Allah!  
Who is called  
By many names,  
To God called  
By many hearts,  
Seeking love and rest,  
Seeking joy and peace--  
Blessed be the Names,  
Blessed be the Names--  
As we come before One  
To prayer.



-Regina Harris Drake-



Today we discussed Islam and visited Masjid At-Taqawa. What struck me most about the information from Ajaan Suchart's morning lecture was the wide diversity of different ethnicities among Muslims and especially that there would be a sizeable population of Chinese Muslims (60 million Muslims in China). His slides showed streets in China filled to capacity with praying Muslims and what he referred to as



“contextualized temples,” i.e., mosques with Chinese styled roofing or ornamentation, or with Chinese styled writing of Arabic, the language of the Qu’ran. Ajaan Suchart stated, “Diversity in humankind shows the greatness of God.” I agreed wholeheartedly. His lecture sought to dispel stereotypes: “Not all Muslims are Arabs and not all Arabs are Muslims,” but it also raised a hard question: What is the Islamic position on homosexuality?

Chinese Muslims migrated to Northern Thailand from China. Muslims also came from other places such as India, Malay, and Pakistan. I appreciated Ajaan Suchart's sharing of his faith from the perspective of a Chinese Thai Muslim. The first words that a Muslim child hears into the right and left ears are the words of the Qu’ran. On the 7<sup>th</sup> day of birth, the Imam names the child. Ajaan Suchart told of traveling with his uncle (recently passed at age 93) to the mosque and I was immediately connected with him having lost my grandmother right before this trip at age 96. All Muslim children attend Muslim school in addition to their regular schooling so that they may learn Arabic in order to read the Qu’ran.

The five pillars of Islam include: 1) the Shahadda (testimony that Allah is God and Mohammed, the messenger of God); 2) the Salat (five daily prayers); 3) the Zakaah (compulsory giving to the poor); 4) Fasting and 5) The Hajj (travel to Mecca at least once; he also referenced *The Autobiography of Malcom X*, pages 391-393, for a great description of hajj. It is also one of my favorite passages in the book and I wanted to volunteer to read it out loud during the lecture, but was silent.

It almost seemed as if Ajaan Suchart wanted to skip the issue of homosexuality since he initially went past it on his power point. It was stated that a Muslim born with a preference for his or her same gender “lives the way that Allah made him.” Ajaan Pam interjected that to become homosexual was forbidden by the Qu’ran and that believers should try to dissuade others from choosing a homosexual lifestyle. Ajaan Suchart did not seem as convinced or conclusive as Ajaan Pam. It seems some Muslims are “wrestling” much as some Christians with their positions on homosexuality and interpretations of sacred scriptures. Even though this is a painful process and hurtful

for many in our group and in our congregations across faiths, open discussion means to me that the doors aren't completely closed and locked away against light and love. That means hope to me although hope may not be nearly enough.

The visit to Masjid At-Taqawa was interesting. Those assigned to us at the mosque were hospitable and a few of the attendees to Friday prayer actually engaged us. One gentleman even came with his camera and took a picture with me in a delightful "role reversal" of our group's picture-taking of everyone and everything else in Thailand!



We were welcomed at the mosque, but still visitors, still observers, still outsiders. We took pictures and they fed us. Then we sat in chairs in the courtyard, a respectable distance from the prayer room to "observe." Many of the late arrivals were also seated outside the prayer room since it was small. Still when I heard the call to prayer and the melodic chanting of the prayers, I felt a part even though I could not understand Arabic.



Throughout the day, there was talk of the one God and to me, speaking to the one God is also universal. The result of my prayers to this same God was the poem opening this log entry. Ajaan Pam later translated the Imam's sermon for us. The heart of the sermon was to "keep" one's mouth and tongue and to use them for good and in creative (as opposed to destructive?) ways as Allah had given them.

After prayer, we met with Ajaan Pam and three other Muslim women to talk about the role of women in Islam. The main objective seemed to be to dispel Western notions that Muslim women were oppressed. They answered questions about the hijab that each chose to wear and gave the reasons for their decisions and how long they had been wearing the covering. They also discussed their activities at the mosque and in the Muslim community. Some of the more candid discussion came in response to reactions to "9-11" and the stereotypic view of all Muslims as terrorists. One of the speakers expressed her anger with America whom she felt perpetrated this stereotype although she also added that her anger had lessened since the attacks in Southern Thailand by

Thai Muslims. She commented that Americans have at least “gone on the Internet and tried to learn more about Islam.”



This day has stimulated my interest in reading the Qu’ran and strengthening my prayer life as a Christian. It has also shown me that we may have to risk *not* “saving face” or *not* being “right” to be open and have the *real* talks that we need to have within our faiths as well as across faiths, within gender as well as across genders, within our orientations as well as across orientations.

*Afterword  
(To Delores)*

*Love will make you buy an international phone in Thailand. Only love can do that. When you don’t speak Thai and the vendors speak only limited English and ironically, it’s all about communications.*

*Love expresses itself in members of the group going with you to buy a cell phone to talk to loved ones at home. You miss them so much.*

*Love expresses itself in the hospitality of those at the kiosk that send you to another store in the mall that turns out to sell only the SIM card needed for an international phone and so sends you back to the first place to purchase the phone itself.*

*Love is definitely in the patience of the first shop who shows you the proper phone, places the SIM card in it and takes it back from you when someone on the phone is asking you for more information in Thai.*

*Love returns in the store that sold you the SIM card, helping you program information into your new phone to make it work.*

*When you finally make the call and your eyes register that you are talking finally to loved ones at home, love is seen in the smiles all around.*

*This is a love story in its most profound sense. Because only love would make you buy an international phone in Thailand.*



**Maxine Ervin**



On Saturday, January 15, 2011 the United Church of Christ (UCC) and Lancaster Theological Seminary (LTS) participants departed from Payap University in Chiang Mai, Thailand to enjoy a day of relaxing and fun.

The excited group of seventeen loaded into two sii-lors (pickup truck taxis) around 7:40 a.m. and departed for the Elephant Camp in Miriam Village that was about an hour away.

On the winding road into the mountains, we made several stops. We first stopped at an open house called The Guest House where expensive wood crafts were made. Near the house, many of the beautiful items made out of wood were displayed on tables and caught the group's attention. The group enjoyed this stop.

After we boarded the sii-lors, the drivers took us for a ride up and down hills and around steep curves. It was fun but we were holding on for our dear lives.



Next we stopped at a wooden boat factory. The building was only a shack. The workers were sitting on dirt floors in an assembly line making parts to complete miniature boats. They seemed so friendly and they made some of the most beautiful craft work I have ever seen. Some of our group members purchased the boats and other pieces of art. The workers were proud of their crafts and eager to share their items with us.

As we continued to our next destination, we passed by a place where Monks were having a convention. Many of them were standing in the yard dressed in orange attire. Some of us had not seen Monks before. The bright orange that they were wearing surely caught our attention. We wanted to see more.

Our next stop was at a place where we went water rafting on a river. When we arrived, our rafting guides were waiting for us. Everyone picked their raft and in no time we were cruising down the water. The water was very cold but it did not matter because we were there to have fun. The rafts did not have seats or belts and were made from bamboo poles. This ride was something new and different for some of us. I was having



the time of my life until the raft drifted closer to the edge of the bank. I tried to duck a tree limb and fell right into the water! I soon realized the water was not deep enough to swim in but that I had my pocket book with me with all of my important documents! In panic, I yelled out, "My pocket book! My pocket book!"



The raft guide found the pocket book that was floating on the river. My papers inside had some water damage but they were okay. I placed my cap back on my head and joined the other two riders, Sarah and Andrea, on the raft. We rafted for about fifteen more minutes, until we reached our lunch destination.

Our sponsors had arranged to have a wonderful lunch for us right near the water. The temperature was mild and just right for a meal. We had a formal meal with china, silverware and cloth napkins.

When lunch was over we discovered that a photographer was taking pictures while we were rafting. He developed some clear and beautiful pictures of all of us. It was exciting looking at everyone's pictures, and we felt good purchasing some of them.



The Elephant Camp was our final destination. When we arrived, we saw several elephants. Some members rushed to purchase food to feed them and then started making preparations for riding. The elephant trainer helped the others on the elephants and they slowly walked down the elephant trail.



"Oh," I thought, "What fun they are having."

There weren't enough elephants for our whole group so some of us had to go to another camp. At this camp, we were helped to get on our elephants and started down the rough trail. The trail led us into woods where there were low ditches and steep hills. The joy ride was over.

The two of the three elephants we were riding on had their babies with them. My co-rider, Charmaine, and I were in disbelief when the elephant behind us pushed our elephant's baby. Our elephant seemed angry and started making loud noises! She tried to turn around to face the elephant behind her and protect her baby. Charmaine was pushed between a limb on a tree and her arm was a little bruised. I was trying to decide if I should jump off the elephant because we were on a steep hill. I thought the elephants and all of us could have easily fallen down the hill. Soon the trainer had the elephant under control and we continued our rough ride. When I saw the elephant going down a steep hill I closed my eyes and my fears became easier to handle.



But in spite of the rough ride, our elephant was big, tall, and gentle, and she was a mother that loved her baby.



**Jennifer Fair**

My grandfather died two days ago. That was the first thought on my mind as I woke up and got ready for church. How strange it seems, to be so far away from the situation itself. It almost doesn't feel real. Yet here I am, in Chiang Mai, Thailand, getting ready for church.

When I went down for breakfast, my professor Greg gave me a hug. I didn't mind that, or telling a few people over breakfast about my grandfather. But when I left breakfast and as we waited for our sii-lors to drive us to church, more and more people I hadn't told came up to me and gave me their condolences. It was nice, but weird somehow. Part of me didn't want them to know until later. But, at least everyone in the group was being kind.

My group arrived at the Karen church around 10 am. We were quickly ushered to our front-row seat, which already made me uncomfortable. The discomfort didn't stop there. It became quickly apparent that this service was a Baptist service, almost identical to any you would see in a Baptist church in American. I felt alienated and alone, not because I was in a foreign country or because I didn't understand the language spoken, but because the theological perspective was so at odds with my own. I sat there, wondering, if I could tell these people my perspective of Christianity, would they even recognize it as Christianity?



Feeling alone at church, I began to think about my grandfather and how he would feel at this service. Would he feel as alienated as me? My grandfather was a dry Methodist. He would have probably related to the liturgy and the message, but felt left out because of the language spoken. How very different grandfather and granddaughter can be!

Then it occurs to me; this is the season of Epiphany, the season when we celebrate God's manifestation, God's self-revelation, to humankind. The season of discovery. I wonder, what more do the Karen people have to discover about themselves as Christians? What can I discover through my grandfather's eyes? What am I discovering about myself?



After church, we joined Ajaan Kathy and Ajaan Mark's group at a restaurant for lunch. After being dropped off at Payap, I changed into my jeans and joined Don and Pat for a trip to the forest temple—Wat Umong. I had fun frolicking among the many Buddha images there. I felt more at church there than I did at the Karen church. I wonder what the Karen congregation would think about that. I wondered what my grandfather would think of that.

After getting back to Payap, the group went to the Sunday walking street market, where the shopping was plentiful and the street performers were many. We then had a delicious dinner at a nearby restaurant. Most of the group went home tired and laden with purchases. I went home, thinking how strange it was that I had so much fun on a day that was also so sad. I sat on my bed and said my evening prayers. And I said a little prayer for my grandfather.





**Don Fenestre**

Ajaan John Butt began today's session by listing Thailand's belief systems in terms of percentage of adherents and cultural influence. Not surprisingly, Theravada Buddhism topped both lists, followed closely by animism and Brahmanism. These in turn were followed by Chinese philosophies (e.g. Confucian classics), Islam, and Christianity. Christianity was unique on this list in that it claims the least amount of followers (>1% of the total population), however it is ranked at 25% in terms of cultural influence. Ajaan John added another belief system that he observes as superseding even Theravada Buddhism in numbers and in cultural influence: consumerism.



Following this broad overview of beliefs Ajaan John focused on Theravada Buddhism, stating that it can be approached through three lenses: The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Like Christ and Mohammed, the Buddha can be understood as one of the "founders" of religion. By comparison, other eras of religion (e.g. prehistoric, tribal, ancient) had no known founders. The founders probably did not view themselves as creators of new belief systems, but more likely thought that they had found something in pre-existing belief systems. Ajaan John gave the example of missing keys: when they are found they are not newly created; they existed before they were lost, then they were discovered. The teachings of such founders served as the foundation for their disciples' lives during times of great cultural change. Furthermore, the era of world religions is marked by a belief that salvation is in the next life, not in our present existence.

The next important concept that was introduced today was UTTR: Ultimate Transcendent Truth and Reality. To explain this concept, Ajaan John suggested that for Christians the UTTR is God, and that while our current concept of God may pass away and the symbolic value of "God" may diminish over time, the truth behind this reality will be preserved. He also commented that, "God is not religious, we are," and that, "hopefully our human pointer will hone in on a more accurate perception of what we call 'God'."



With these basic concepts defined, we could now begin to answer the question, “What was it that the Buddha found?” His “finding event” is known as his enlightenment. What he found in the state of enlightenment is known as The Dharma. The Dharma is the Buddhist equivalent of the UTTR and is defined as “the structure that holds something up”. Just as God can be represented in (at least) two ways (e.g. GOD=UTTR or God=human version of UTTR), the Dharma can also be understood as representing different concepts. THE DHARMA is what Buddha encountered under the Bodhi tree: it is what changed his entire being into something new. The Dharma, on the other hand, is the articulation of Buddha’s experience of DHARMA. The Dharma of the Buddha can be divided into three essential parts: avoid evil, do good, purify your mind. These, in turn, are expressed in the Four Noble Truths, which correspond to ancient medical formulae:



1. The Unhealthy Condition (*Sarvem Dukkha*–“all is suffering”)
2. Cause
3. Healthy Condition
4. Treatment/Prescription



The term *Dukkha* derives from a Pali word meaning “imperfection” and can be illustrated by a wheel which does not turn correctly. Ajaan John explained the condition of *Sarvem Dukkha* as being born on a gallows with a noose around our neck. The noose may be made of fine silk, or it may be made of barbed wire dipped in acid, but in either case the result is death. Upon dying, however, we wake to find ourselves on the steps of another gallows (reincarnation). Enjoyable things may happen as we are hanging; however, the context of such enjoyment is *Dukkha*.

Following John’s discussion of the first of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism, Greg offered a discussion of the Christian theological background which informed John’s explanation of UTTR. Among the concepts discussed at this lunchtime session were *via negativa*, Bonhoeffer’s *Cost of Discipleship*, Tillich’s concept of God as “the ground of being”, the “death of God” movement, and C.S. Lewis’s opposition of theology and faith. Regarding this last point, Kathy suggested that theology and faith (seminarians and lay people) need to be in constant dialogue with one another. To sum up the discussion of UTTR in a Christian context, Greg commented that, “If we want to follow Jesus we have to get past Jesus.”



In the afternoon, we visited Wat Suan Dok where we saw the Reliquaries of Northern Thai Royalty and a giant gold Buddha that was being renovated. We concluded our visit to Suan Dok with the much anticipated “monk chat.” During this time we were able to gather in small groups with monks to ask questions about Buddhism and discuss monastic life. My group met with three monks and learned about the education of monks, meditative practices, and advocacy work that one of the monks was doing on behalf of women who were seeking ordination as Buddhist monks.



Later that evening, we celebrated Jowanna’s birthday with cake, ice cream, and seaweed potato chips!



**Susan Fritz**

White wisps of clouds hugged crisp blue skies as we slowly meandered curvaceous roadways high into the rugged mountains of Chiang Mai towards the northern Thai Buddhist temple known as Wat Doi Suthep. Wat Suthep was built during the Lanna Thai dynasty. According to the local legend, the site for the Buddhist temple was chosen by one of God's creatures, an elephant. The elephant found its way up the hillside, located a level piece of ground, circled it three times, and then knelt down, thus marking the site as a place of holiness.



Prior to 1935, the journey to Wat Doi Suthep was arduous, for no paved roadway existed. Pilgrims would travel by foot up the rugged terrain. I can only imagine how difficult the trip must have been prior to 1935 and I applaud the pilgrims for their unwavering devotion. Today, the terrain is still heavily forested and rocky, but a well-paved, winding road leads visitors to the summit. We were privileged to travel in an air conditioned tour bus.



Upon reaching the summit, visitors can elect to take an elevator or traverse several hundred red-tiled stairs lined with glass embedded, slithering Naga serpents to access the Wat. Like most tourist locations, hungry vendors line both sides of the lower stairs, hawking their wares. I found this to be quite distracting because it diminished the experience of climbing the towering stairway. Instead of the meditative, reflective Buddhist experience I was anticipating, commercialism was in full swing. In spite of this distraction, walking the stairs is well worth the extra effort but is not for the faint-at-heart. Even those who are in good shape experience rapid heartbeats and beads of sweat breaking forth as they journey up the stairs. Our group split fairly evenly between those taking the elevator and those willing to test their endurance.

The view from the summit is spectacular! From the lower Wat terrace, visitors receive a panoramic view of the sprawling, smog-covered city of Chiang Mai, as well as views of the Mae Ping River Valley. Several long rows of bells and gongs of different shapes and sizes are spaced strategically around the terrace. Of course, these were quite tempting to many of us and several members of our group exercised great liberty in ringing as many bells and gongs as possible!

During our time on the terrace, John Butt from Payap University told us that Wat Doi Suthep is considered one of the most important Wats in Thailand. On average, the temple receives 50,000 baht per day from visitors, as well as financial support from the Royal Treasury.



One of the primary reasons many individuals support the Wat financially is because they consider it a means of making merit.



We had the privilege to “make merit” ourselves at the conclusion of our visit. Our traveling community entered a dimly lit western viharn and sat quietly before a Buddhist monk, who was dressed in vivid orange swaths of cloth on a raised dais. John and another member of our group, Delores, transferred a contribution to the monk, who then offered a prayer for our group and doused us heavily with lustral water from a shallow bowl. After we were thoroughly soaked and the blessing was concluded, John received documentation of the gift and we left the sanctuary as quietly as we entered it.

Theologically, I struggle with this concept of making merit. I’ve always believed that God is less concerned with your financial resources and more concerned with the status of your heart. It strikes me as odd that Buddhists place such an emphasis on making merit, and making sure that others know that you’ve made merit, in order to draw closer to the Buddha. This defies everything I believe in. I’d rather have a clean heart, love others, and try to do what is right in God’s eyes than strive to show my goodness through merit making.

From the lower terrace, our group walked to the gold-plated chedi located in the middle of a square, tiled courtyard. The chedi was spectacular and quite sizeable. On each of the four corners of the chedi are golden parasols which symbolize royal regalia. The chedi was completed during the reign of King Muang Kaew and is surrounded by an enclosed walkway. Individuals who seek to make merit at the temple circle the chedi three times carrying gifts of flowers. There are also many stations for lighting incense and candles. On the day of our visit, the stations were quite full of Thai’s prostrating themselves before smaller golden Buddha images. In many ways, I found this to be somewhat like stories from the Old Testament where the Israelites were worshipping other gods, and sometimes, golden calves.



From the chedi, John led us on a circular tour of the cloister, which contains beautiful hand-painted artwork of Buddha images and murals. The stories John shared about the artwork tied in wonderfully with the classroom education we received earlier in the morning and on the previous day. The artwork covered the life and ideas of the Buddha. John discussed, at length, the three characteristics of human life according to Buddhists:

*a-nicca*, where everything is in a constant state of change, there is no enduring self, and nothing is permanent; *an-atta*, which grows out of *a-nicca* and indicates that nothing about me will last forever; and, *atta*, the idea of the soul/self as a virus. The Buddha believed that anything we experience in life can be analyzed by the five *khandha*'s: body, perception, feeling, will/volition, and consciousness. Ultimately, meditation is the way to see these things clearly. By meditating, we learn to focus on seeing things as they really are and to slow down life in order to see and understand these things.

After a thorough and informative description of the artwork, our group headed across the street from the Wat to the well-manicured Orchid Jade Factory. The Orchid Jade Factory is a family business, specializing in hand cut works of art and custom jewelry composed of nephrite and jadeite. Most of the jade they work with is imported from British Columbia, Canada. Nephrite is of lesser quality than jadeite. Jadeite is quite difficult to extract from stone and comes in a variety of colors: lavender, blue, red, black, and green. The most expensive stone is imperial jade, which is naturally deep green in color.

The store owners shared a video clip of their business, and then took us back into the workroom where approximately fifteen men sat before stone cutting machines. What struck me most as we entered the work area is that the men seemed extremely tired and sad...and none of the men were actually running a machine. My hunch was two-fold: the work day was probably complete for the men and they had stayed behind to accommodate our group; and, these men, who create beautiful, lovely objects of affection and art most likely could ill afford any of the items they created on a day-to-day basis. It tore at my heart strings because it made me realize that we Americans, who sometimes complain about our financial struggles and other issues, are actually richly blessed in comparison with many others throughout the world. It was one of the first times in my life that I felt like a dirty American. The gulf between the rich and the poor was staring me in the face. In spite of these feelings, I, along with all of my other traveling companions, visited the store and many purchases were made.



We concluded the day by eating dinner at one of John and Martha Butt's favorite restaurants, Hong Taew Restaurant. The restaurant was cozy and inviting and, of course, meals were served family style. As usual, the food and companionship was great and I think everyone enjoyed kicking back a little bit from the busy day.



Charmaine Johnson

**“A Common Ground to Conquering a Crisis...in the Midst of Diversity”**

*“They don’t all agree in one tune. For one sings this doctrine and the next something different – so that peoples’ brains are...turned and bewildered...Then again see them divide and sub divide, split into parties-rail at and excommunicate each other-turn out of one meeting and receive into another...must give high offence to all intelligent and rational minds.”*

*-18<sup>th</sup> century Anglican Clergyman Charles Woodmason-*

Our 3-week pilgrimage in Thailand was saturated with opportunities to experience the Divine through interaction and dialogue with Buddhists, Muslims and Christians. The highlights of experiences encountered during Day 12 were certainly filled with that opportunity but a unique and profound element of that day existed due to an opportunity to observe dialogue and engage in discourse on a common issue with representatives from Buddhist, Muslim and Christian communities *simultaneously*. The central focus of this dialogue and discourse was a common crisis that plagues and penetrates all religious communities in Thailand – the pandemic of HIV/AIDS.

This dialogue and discourse occurred during the Annual Conference for the Interfaith Network on HIV in Thailand (INHT). The annual gathering at a local hotel in Chiang Mai consisted of persons from various religious communities for the purpose of bringing common concerns together. According to Oui, “we have to live together and work



Photo above: The Panelists (from left to right) - Oui (Panel Facilitator/Translator); Mr. Rawsidee Lertariyapongkul (Young Muslim Association in Thailand); Rev. Prawato Khid-Arn (Church of Christ in Thailand – CCT) AIDS Ministry of CCT; Phrakru Phipitsutatorn (Buddhist Monk, Chairperson on Interfaith Network on HIV/AIDS in Thailand) Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University; Rev. Sanban Wuitti, AIDS Ministry of CCT

together. HIV presents a common ground for us to work together. We are united together to be more effective.” The panelists also highlighted the advantages, including funding advantages, of being unified to address such common issues as HIV/AIDS. They indicated the challenges in working alone in order to address this pandemic on a widespread level. It is challenging to work alone because if Buddhists see priests or pastors, they believe Christians are trying to proselytize and convert them. *(I wonder where that idea came from?)* It functions more effectively when a monk is by their side. Togetherness yields more knowledge. More knowledge yields more experience. And more experience (often) yields an increase in funding. *(Does the cliché “there’s strength in diversity” resonate in your spirit yet?)*

There is undoubtedly a connection between social problems in Thailand (sex trafficking, drug usage, etc.) and HIV/AIDS infections. Since the first reported case of HIV/AIDS in Thailand in 1984, the population representing newly reported cases has drastically changed. The population that now represents the largest number of newly reported cases is the youth in rural and urban areas. Education in schools is the primary tactic being used to address HIV/AIDS in order to reduce the number of new infections in Thailand. This includes education in private/faith-based schools. As Oui noted, “it is much easier to deal with youth...easier to educate young people rather than change the old.”

Thailand Statistics	
Estimated total population, 2010	67,089,500
Estimated number of people living with HIV, end 2009	530,000
Adults (15+)	520,000
Women (15+)	210,000
Estimated adult (15-49) HIV prevalence	1.3%
Estimated number of AIDS deaths in 2009	28,000

Even though differences of opinions existed among the panelists regarding promoting abstinence and condom distribution, there were several uniting themes that were prevalent in all religious communities represented—the importance of life building skills in the school curriculum, the importance of religious teaching in life building skills, the onset of formal HIV/AIDS education at the age of 12. (In the past, formal HIV/AIDS education began in high school but it is now in middle school.) Central to

these tactics is the application of religious teachings FIRST and FOREMOST. (All Thai schools include Buddhism as a part of the basic curriculum.)

Political concerns are certainly not void in the discussion of such a pandemic. If you talk about any negative aspect of a country too much, it might affect tourism. After all, tourism IS the NUMBER ONE generator of revenue for Thailand! Therefore, campaigns to attract tourists to Thailand will certainly be void of any such issues since too much talk about it might derail tourists. Since INHT receives government funding for programs, it becomes critical to consider and become cognizant of other issues



(economy, tourism, etc.) that are embedded in the decision making process for program funding.

After the panel discussion, we divided into 2 groups. Each group had the privilege of listening to the testimony of a conference attendant/HIV/AIDS activist who has been infected with HIV/AIDS. I was honored to hear the testimony of Saranja, a 36 year old native of Northeast Thailand who serves as a local disc jockey spreading her message through the airwaves of Thailand and a life building skills instructor at a local community center.



Since there is a (universal) concept that HIV/AIDS represents a religious misconduct (with the exception of blood transfusions), a stigma is attached to Saranja and so many others who disclose their infections within their community. (We learned that to be Thai is to be a Buddhist. Therefore, religion is organically inculcated and embedded in their culture.) Saranja did not initially disclose her status when she was diagnosed in 2000 during a pregnancy test. After the birth of her son in 2001, who is not infected, she disclosed her status to her husband, who subsequently developed unhealthy habits (alcohol) and is now deceased. Her doctor was instrumental in providing HIV/AIDS education during her pregnancy and served as a primary resource of not only HIV/AIDS education but education regarding healthy habits and behavior that might improve the quality of her life.



*Ajaan Pam Akarapison (Program Coordinator, Institute for Religion, Culture and Peace – Payap University/Group Translator), Saranja (HIV/AIDS Activist)*

After experiencing a near-death experience and a plethora of health issues, Saranja decided to take heed to her doctor's advice and exchange her factory job (income of 8000 baht a month) for a gardening position (2000 baht a month) – a significant decrease in income but an improved quality of life that enables her to develop long-term budgeting and saving habits in order to enhance her son's education, renovate her house, help her family, etc.

Even though Saranja converted to Christianity from Buddhism 9 years ago, she

remains an activist in the Buddhist community as well. Her strong network consists of other infected persons/activists of various faiths that meet once a month to provide ongoing support to each other. Her personal mantra is to be active and maintain good relationships in order to live a sustainable life. Three activities which remain crucial to her overall well-being are gardening, meditation/faith and exercise. The meditation habits that were developed while a Buddhist are embedded into her daily practices as a Christian and are EXTREMELY important in her overall well-being.

When I asked Sarnaja for a message to bring to clergy and laity in the United States, her response was to spread a message to those infected with HIV/AIDs during every pastoral care opportunity that is presented. She said, “Encourage them to fight for their lives. Let them know they can still live their lives.” She said, “It (HIV/AIDS) is not the end... you can fight because you still have life!”



From left to right: Charmaine Johnson (SECUCC), Saranya (HIV/AIDS Activist), Maxine Ervin (SECUCC)

Upon reflecting on the common ground that was exhibited during the discussion with representatives of various faiths as well as the power of Saranja’s articulation of her lived experiences, I am reminded of the strength in learning how to work together from the experiences of others. One of the goals of peace is to learn from the experience of others because *the more we understand other faiths, the more we understand our own faith*. We can be more effective at the proclamation of the Good News when we understand each other. For in the midst of diversity of religious beliefs and views, there is a common ground in conquering an issue that impacts humanity. And the coming together of faiths is the ultimate embodiment of that common ground!



**Sarah Kim**

Every time I worship in Thailand—whether it is in a local church or at the seminary chapel—I feel as though I have traveled back in time. It is a strange feeling; the sensation can be best described by the nostalgic memories of a neighborhood church I used to attend when I was a little girl in Korea. For a brief moment this morning, I could imagine what time-travel would really feel like—it is like visiting an old world that has yet to see the new world with which I have become so familiar.



I felt the sensation again as I sat in the Thursday morning chapel of the McGilvary College of Divinity. The chapel floor was full with students, faculty, and many visitors including the seventeen members of our group. While the Caucasian male minister preached about “Baptism” in English, Thai students heard the translated version of the message over the receivers. Honestly, I couldn’t care less about the sermon. I was not particularly impressed; actually, I was a little despondent in light of our meeting with Professor Chuleepan just before the worship service.



I met Ajaan Chuleepan when I first visited the school three years ago. At that time, she spoke of her experience as a doctoral student in America and of her outreach ministry in Thailand—she was dynamic and full of passion and confidence. This morning, among other



stories, she shared the challenges in ministry that seem to have wounded her spiritually over the years. Working with people in poverty, sex workers, prisoners, and people with serious disease such as HIV/AIDS is difficult enough, but having to deal with a lack of support from her own community has to be a disheartening reality. The school is where she keeps her livelihood, but it is also a community that discourages interfaith activities that are sometimes necessary in Rev. Chuleepan’s ministry.

The school’s difficulty in embracing other religions—e.g. Buddhism—became even more apparent during our afternoon session with Ajaan John and Ajaan Allen and their Christian and Buddhist monk students. The two professors taught a course where seminary students and Buddhist monks engaged in conversations on faith and spirituality; and despite the emotional and intellectual struggles the students of both religions had to endure, the outcome was a phenomenal transformation in all those who participated in the class. The intentional

conversation allowed both parties to open their ears first, and then their hearts—to see the “possibility” of other pathways toward what they each claim to be the ultimate Truth. It has to be a humbling experience for those who can truly see it.



Designing and teaching the course on interfaith dialogue seems to have put Ajaan John in jeopardy. Apparently, the school does not like to see orange-robed Buddhist monks roaming around the campus. John expressed disappointment in that many Christian communities in Thailand do not appreciate interfaith dialogues unless the purpose is to proselytize non-Christians. He made a comment about some zealous Korean missionaries who would display a show of loud prayers for the destruction of all Buddhist temples in Thailand. I wasn't surprised



to hear this, because I knew that many Korean Christians believe Christianity is the only way to salvation and thus superior to other religions. But I did feel embarrassed and angered. Pure ignorance had to be the driving force of these self-righteous Christians to ask God for such annihilation of another religion of historic and cultural significance. Ignorance breeds misunderstanding which in turn spawns all kinds of chaos and violence, I thought.

Ajaan John is a great spirit. Despite all that is going on in their busy lives, he and his wife Martha graciously invited our group over for dinner to celebrate our last evening in Chiang Mai before we depart for the Bangkok portion of the program tomorrow morning. When we got to their beautiful home in the suburbs, a quiet dinner party that contrasted the previous year's spectacular festivity awaited us. The food was delicious as always and we were in good company of one another. The entertainment was a surprise; Dada showed her magic tricks after Ajaan Mark and Jason together sang a song for us. Then we all sang the “Elephant Song” in groups, in Thai! Lots of laughter abounded this evening.



But we did remember our three compatriots who were in the hospital this evening—Jowanna and Don who became ill, and Greg as their guardian. Mark had to run to the hospital as soon as he put down his guitar, followed by Kathy who stayed the night at the hospital. This was the end of two weeks into the program, and the group was experiencing a point of transition—emotionally, physically, and spatially. It was unknown what awaited us in Bangkok, but we needed to continue to stay strong and focused through our departure from what had now become more familiar in the comforts of our home away from home here in Chiang Mai.





**Andrea Mai**

The day began with great concern about our two members who were still in the hospital. The hope was that they would fly with us to Bangkok. As we all gathered with our luggage the good news was that both Don and Jowanna were on their way to meet us after both being released from their overnight at the local hospital.

The flight to Bangkok was easy and the start of our transition. We didn't know what we were transitioning to but there was both anticipation and weariness in the air. The challenge was to be present to the change in location, the change in atmosphere, the change in ourselves. After two weeks of being in Chiang Mai at Payap University (with a couple of days in Mae Sot), it had started to feel familiar, comfortable, an easy place to be as we took in loads of information that many or most of us didn't quite know how to process just yet. But this trip was not about being comfortable so off we flew to the major city of Bangkok with its huge population of 8-9 million residents.

Upon landing, our luggage went in one direction and our bodies went in another. We were heading to the largest Wat in Thailand and the world. It is known as Wat Phra Dhammakaya, a large compound with current capacity for 300,000 meditators. They are

in the process of building a facility that would hold up to 1,000,000 meditators. With the intention of becoming the Mecca of Buddhism, the Dhammakaya was certainly the largest Buddhist facility we'd been to. The roof of the Dhammakaya Cetiya is covered in gold Buddha statuettes making a dazzling display from the air.



This place is the home of 1200 monks and 400 novices. On the day we visited they were busy raking leaves. It was quite a sight and sound to behold. Hundreds of monks in saffron robes with rakes piling up mounds of leaves, bagging leaves, sweeping leaves. The sound was blissful, peaceful. I'm sure it was a quick way to burn off lunch which was their last meal of the day. Each of their meals is served under an enormous pavilion. Both the breakfast and lunch meals are provided to them- but it was not exactly clear if they go out to ask for alms as most other monks do. It would be hard to imagine since it is a bit off the beaten path and



there are so many of them.



The Dhammakaya is said to be a movement popular with the middle-class. We jokingly referred to it as a Mega-Wat. It was hard to fathom all the money that goes into a place that size. I wondered how much of their call for inner and world peace becomes realized in such a place. What is it about such a massive

organization and practice facility that speaks to the hearts of the Thai people? It is a question on my heart, one that I don't know I will ever have the answer to.

Later that day, we made our way to our new home for the remaining days. It was an eerie red sunset through thick layers of smog. The sky seemed almost on fire that evening as we moved towards our new location. We settled into our rooms at the Bangkok Christian Guest House in the heart of the city right around dinner time. The meal was served for us at BCGH. Some people went down the street to have a pizza. What a great thrill to have Western food options available within a block or two!



Speaking of food, all the streets were lined with food vendors and customers were happily seated in the plastic chairs that lined the sidewalks. It might have been interesting to try some of the food at the vendor directly across from BCGH- they always had a full house. But too many of us had suffered various degrees of stomach troubles to push our luck!

It was good to rest that night, to prepare for the next round of awakening. We didn't know what was coming our way, but I was starting to think that ignorance is bliss. Of course, the Lord had other plans for our group and so we all tried to stay open to the final remaining days in this place so very different, so big and alive and challenging.



**Gail Minnick**

This was our first full day in Bangkok. We stayed at the Christian Guest House in the downtown area and we awoke bright and early for breakfast. This was a nice change of pace eating brown cereal, poached eggs, yogurt, wonderful fruit and of course, rice.

After filling ourselves up, we set out in two vans for Songdhammakalyani Bhikkuuni (women monks) Monastery. It took a little over an hour to get there, but what an excited visit we had. Several samaneri novices gave us a tour of the grounds where we saw their statue to the “Mother of the World” (which shows a grandmother holding a child and a girl and boy reading at her feet), took in some new building construction of the “I Love You” building, witnessed a part of their daily lives (monk and her dog), and, of course, visited their temple.

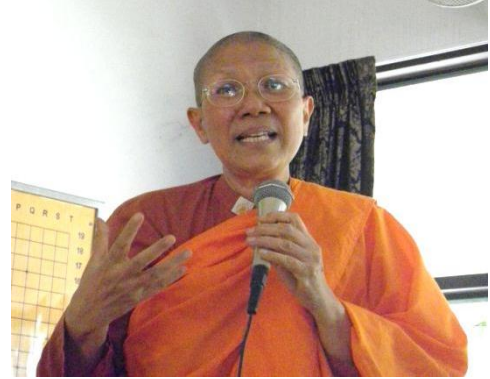
The temple was built based on a vision of the Medicine Buddha which was eventually turned into a painting and then a magnificent statue dedicated to healing by faith and herbal medicine. It was an amazing blue Buddha which towered over us.



After our tour, we had the chance to sit and talk with The Venerable Dhammananda who was the first Thai bhikkuni ordained in Theravada tradition in 2003. She is an amazing woman and has a vision that women will continue the fight to be included. She spoke about being an “engaged” Buddhist in which they leave the “temples” of their meditation and prayers for involvement in the “temples” of society. She spoke on social justice, compassion, and our spiritual connection across religions. She developed a



process for women to be ordained temporarily in Temporary Samaneri Ordination (TSO) where women can come and experience living in a monastery and then return home. The ordination of women has been a long struggle since the time of the Buddha, but more recently when Sara and Chongdi were forced to disrobe and give up their monk attire in 1928. After our talk, we were invited to serve food to the monks and visit the book store.



We did take a ride around the Patom Chedi, but since we were running late we just drove around the complex. That evening the group split up to enjoy some free time. A group of about 8 folks went on a tour of the red light district and some folks got a flavor for the color and visited a lesbian bar. It was an amazing day.





**Delores Owens**

We decided to go to the Royal Palace of Bangkok in the morning due to changes in schedule. What a wonderful experience! When we first got there it was overwhelming; it seemed like an amusement park with all of its colors and designs—how awesome, I thought. But as time went by, I began to think that it was really sad to see so much money put into this place with so many needs in Thailand—such a stark contrast to the refugee camp. It went from awesome to awful in my mind pretty quickly; it reminded me of the Disney World Epcot Center—it is a beautiful place, but again, so many people in the United States could use that money for housing and food.



I was very pleased when the group decided to go to the Royal Palace this morning. Afterwards, John suggested that we should take a tour of the river on the boat taxi. As we stood there waiting for the boat, Greg asked if we were excited. The answer to his question was a hearty Yes! I truly was excited to see the city this way. The river was going up stream, so the boats had to really fight the current with lots of debris in the water.



I was amazed at the contrast between the buildings from high rises to really run down homes and businesses on the banks of the river. The boat ride was very relaxing to me; it reminded me of the Key West in Florida. Walking to the boat was an experience for me; all of the markets we walked through had different smells of raw fish, chicken, and all sorts of fruits and vegetables. I had to cover my nose and mouth because the smell was so overwhelming to me.



In the evening, we went to a very casual worship service which I enjoyed. The worship was very familiar as I felt like I was at home in the U.S. The sermon brought up some critical thinking such as the question of Jesus being the one and only way. I found the people who participated in the worship service to be very caring and sincere.

**Pat Spears**

After breakfast at the Christian Guest house with coffee strong enough yet again to float a mule shoe, we jumpstarted our day to the Sky Train. We headed off to the Church of Christ in Thailand headquarters in Bangkok.



A beautiful building with lovely manicured grounds awaited us. The building looked like any Christian office buildings in Americas down to the many Caucasian representations of Jesus found in many of the offices. Our morning meeting was held in a conference room where we started off with good news about Don.

Our speaker and moderator was Rev. Mike Fucella, a Scots Southern Baptist who arrived in Thailand twenty-one years ago for a short pilgrimage. He is now the Advisor to the General Secretary of Ecumenical Affairs and Child Protection. We started our meeting off with a Worship Service, something that was rarer than expected considering the fact that our group is made up of church people and a welcome activity for me.



The Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT) started when the first missionaries, mainly Presbyterian, arrived in Thailand. Some two hundred years later, the CCT has extensive land and property holdings, including 1/3 of Chiang Mai over twenty four different schools, two universities, and eight medical centers. As someone once told me, with great wealth comes great responsibility. As we were informed at lunch, with assets too great to know exactly how much there is, the influence of the CCT should be widespread. While there is influence in the programs and through the educational facilities that they own and operate, there is also the realization that being a minority in a predominantly



Buddhist society there is a reluctance to be involved in government politics or engage in social issues. The reality is that any of the schools can be removed from the CCT with their registry lost from the government. What is noticeable although I am possibly looking at it through a cloudy lens is that for all of this wealth, the majority of the churches are rural and their members poor.

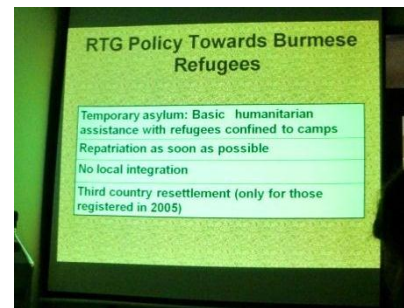
At the CCT, we met the Vice-Moderator, Ajaan Rune who has been a teacher of Theology for thirty years at the McGilvary College of Divinity. We also met and talked with Satanun Boonyakiat, the Dean of the Seminary. Then we were treated to a wonderful lunch before departing back to the Christian Guesthouse for a brief rest before our afternoon lecture with the Thailand Burma Border Consortium.



Jack Dunford, has been the Executive Director of TBBC for 33 years. He started his talk and Power Point Presentation with a slide of the members of the Consortium for 2011 (the Countries Involved). His lecture brought us full circle from visiting the Burma Issues office, the medical clinic and the refugee camps in Mae Sot, twelve days ago. Several of his slides show the conditions within the camps which we were not able to see when we visited Mae Sot. This powerpoint presentation laid out in visual detail the information received audibly earlier.

One of the slides shows the RTG Policy towards the Burmese Refugees which details temporary asylum with refugees confined to camps; no local integration; repatriation as soon as possible. This is the policy put into place 27 years and three generations ago. In 1984, the first ten thousand refugees came from the Karen Resistance front lines in the Mae Sot area. Since 1996, in fifteen years, there have been 3,600 villages destroyed and one-million people displaced. This leaves the refugees as Internally Displaced Persons with few if any rights. This includes education, health care or other benefits from the Thailand system. The TBBC has been working and adapting over these long years on how best to educate and train from within the camps to offer some sort of sustainability for the citizens there. Within the larger framework of Relief Assistance, the TBBC is responsible for food, shelter, and non-food items.

During all conversations and discussions, Burma is always used to reference the country and never Myanmar. This is a political statement, Ajaan Jack shared with us. The regime in Burma changed the name of the country to Myanmar without the people's input.





While there is some resistance to resettlement in other countries from the Burma Issues in Mae Sot, this is due to the relocation of skilled workers. This sets up a vicious cycle of investment of both time and resources for the long-term application of training and education with the subsequent loss of those skilled workers to other countries and out of the camps. As an example, Finland and Norway pick the best integration possibilities. This would be those trained as teachers, or with medical knowledge, etc. Different countries have different means of choosing refugees for resettlement. Some countries set a quota and then choose the most vulnerable for relocation. The criteria of the USA are that everyone can apply and everyone can go, although many are ruled out for health reasons.



Resettlement is the only available durable solution but the cost is the loss of the family and friends within the camp. Although a benefit of resettlement is in the form of money being sent back to the community in the camps. The sad fact is that while 60,000 people were resettled between 2006 and 2010, the net population decrease was zero, due to the influx of more refugees and births within the camp. Coupled to that is due to relocation, seventy percent of the skilled workers were lost to the community.

This slide shows the refugees that were resettled in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, USA. Although made up of several different hill tribes, once relocated, they have formed a community within the community. I have to agree with my friend, Gail Minnick, on this one; it is amazing and ironic that we had to travel halfway around the world to see a picture of the refugees located in the same city where we are attending seminary.



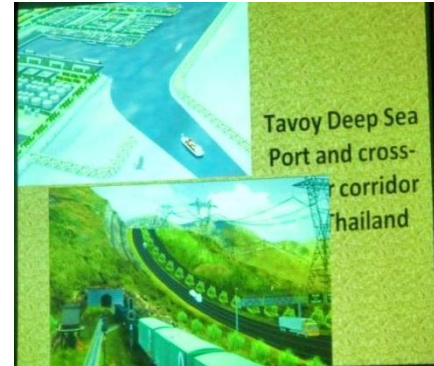
Due to the extended time that refugees have been given aid, the TBBC is now under pressure from donors for change. But as Ajaan Jack shared with us that has to come at a political/governmental level. The TBBC has ample proof of the numbers of people that are being assisted and the support that is being offered them. The TBBC has had to do more with less, due to currency fluctuations and the increase in the price of rice and other staples. The realization that this has been going on for 26 years and cannot continue as business as usual is apparent. But countries offering aid (with USA and Australia being the largest) also have to offer pressure to bring about change in Burma to stave off the influx of refugees fleeing their homes and property in the hills.

With better building practices and planting of sustainable harvest such as bamboo and thatch for shelter materials, self-reliance for the community is possible. This would bring the cost of building houses down per family with the possibility of



longer lifespans for the houses. The long term savings until a permanent solution is available, such as repatriation, will offer the refugee less reliance on aid and also afford them training so that if repatriation is ever possible they have the knowledge to setup and organize their communities once again in Burma.

Currently two major projects are in the works in Burma which would impact the possibility of repatriation. The development of the Tavoy Deep Sea Port and the Cross Corridor between Burma and Thailand is currently underway with an appeal for investors. This project would provide electricity and transportation between Thailand and Burma. The appeal for investors involves putting a positive spin on the reality of life within both Burma and Thailand at the border. Once enough positive attention is given, the investment dollars will begin to enter Burma. This will cause more and more refugees to rush to Thailand in front of the same military force that has been displacing the hill citizens for the past twenty-six years to obtain access to the natural resources of their land.



To raise money and awareness of the continued struggle, the TBBC has published a book of stories written by the refugees that have been displaced. With graphic, wonderful pictures, Nine Thousand Nights: Refugees from Burma: A People's Scrapbook is available for purchase. The nine-thousand nights from the title refer to the number of nights in twenty-seven years. The book reveals the journey of the refugees with stories of their homeland, their arrival in a strange new world, building a life within the camps, their hope for home and how they live with uncertainty. It's a powerful publication that gives a more in-depth view than what is available here with a few words. This book also answers the question for me of why should I do something? This leads to the next question of what can I do? The best way to be helpful, advises the TBBC, is to be informed. Read to understand; influence US policy; contribute funding; take in refugees; put pressure on the Regime of Burma; work with Senators and Congressman. With the General Election recently the International Community believes things are currently peaceful and quiet. The Dictatorship of Burma would like everyone to feel that way so that tourist money will be spent in Burma. On the flight over to Thailand, after the elections, a member of our group saw travel ads to Burma.

While there are resettled native people in our own country (Native Americans) and poverty in every state, shouldn't we be doing something with our own people first? The call I am hearing is that we may be more effective in systemically changing the lives of citizens in our own country by first helping an international organization, help the Burmese people. Will you help me answer this call?

**Jowanna Tillman**

Today is my day to add to the reflection of this wonderful trip. Today started off great. We had French toast with REAL maple syrup. Score! The few times we have had French toast it has been with honey. After breakfast, I am off to 7eleven to buy more minutes for the phone for Don.

I am back in plenty of time to blog before getting in the van for the discussion between Shiite and Sunni Muslims in Bangkok.

The mosque that we are visiting is across the street from the French Embassy (French toast/French Embassy – see the theme). We walk through a narrow alley to get to our destination. There are lots of cats along the way. This mosque shares a wall with a Buddhist Temple. In this area is the location of the cemetery for the community. We were informed that the cemetery is about 80 years old.

The building in which the mosque is housed is about 100 years old. It was on the bank of the river 200 years ago. The government wanted that land for a Custom House so the land was exchanged to the current location. This happened during Rama V reign. This mosque is unique in its symmetry. Arabic is read from right to left. When standing facing Mecca on the left, the script is traditionally written from right to left. The right side is the exact opposite. I took a picture to show this symmetry. The windows also have this symmetry. It is quite beautiful.

Imam Abdul Ahad kindly told us the history of the mosque and some background information on Islam. He stated that the reason that Muslims stand so close together during prayer is so that Satan cannot enter. He stated that Muslims should be taught to be kind and generous. When telling us Islamic principles, he often used stories to explain what he meant. I could tell he is a good teacher by the way he told his stories.

He stated that there are about 1,700 members of this mosque and about 400-500 more foreigners and guests that use this mosque. He then told us a few stories about the Prophet. He also used examples in Islam that parallel Christianity such as the story of Lot and his family;



he discussed the line of Adam, Noah, Moses and Abraham. He stated that Islam's mission is peace, that Islam means peace.



A question was asked if non-believers should be allowed in a Mosque. The Imam stated that there are only three sanctuaries that a non-believer should not be permitted – Mecca, Medina and one mosque in Jerusalem. Any other Mosque can host those who want to come as friends. We then move from the Mosque itself to a conference area across the street. We are now joined with some men from the Iran Cultural Center. The Imam's name was Qawwa.

A question was asked about how long Sunni/Shiites have been in Thailand. Both have been in Thailand for about 400 years.

The next question was what are the differences between Shiite and Sunni? This question was answered in a very around about way. There was agreement between the Imams that this is a question that Americans always seem to ask. They both agreed that they worship the same ways and even will worship together. There was a discussion about leadership on whether an Imam is voted in or should be part of the Prophet's blood line. Both agreed this discussion started before the Prophet had died.



I asked what they would want us to tell other Americans. They said to tell people that they live in peace. They also discussed the issues in the south of Thailand. There was agreement that the problems in the south have more to do with politics than Islam. The South's economy is 30% of the GDP for Thailand. Why use revenge when that would make you go to hell? It is written in the Q'uran that if you kill one person you kill the world. Killing is unacceptable in Islam.



We also ate lunch with the leaders before they were called to prayer. I was sitting across from the Shiite leaders. Only one spoke really good English. I had a broken conversation with one of the gentlemen. From our conversation I gathered he has a brother in the States who is a massage therapist.

After they return from prayer, there is a little more time to ask questions. The Imam states that the Q'uran slowly reveals its secrets. The Q'uran is a book of signs.

When the Imam is questioned about GLBT issues he states that homosexuality is forbidden. Punishment for gay people is isolation. When further questioned, he states that isolation means that you live with your family but you should not be exposed to the public.

My feeling on this morning is that these two communities probably don't get together very often. Not that they have any problems with each other, but they just don't dialogue much. It seemed like when you get together with your cousin who gets on your nerves but in front of company you put on the best face. I was really glad for the experience because from what we were told, this type of discussion would not happen in many other countries. I was glad that they took the time to meet with us for a few hours.



This afternoon we met with Sulak Sivaraksa. I personally felt his introduction was not adequate to prepare us for this meeting. I felt that we were meeting a very important icon in Thailand but I was not putting the whole reasons why together. We were actually in the presence of a man who has challenged the view of the monarchy, gone to jail for his views but the whole time has been advocating for peace.

He gave us an overview of the red shirt/yellow shirt movement. He gave us his views on the poor and the mega Wat that we visited last week. To read more about him and his peace movement, view his website <http://www.sulak-sivaraksa.org/en/>.





**Bryant Woodford**

On this morning, travelers were awakened to a variety of different agendas. This was our last day in Bangkok. All were attempting to find room in their luggage for all of the wonderful items purchased on the trip. Some travelers took the sky train to the Jim Thompson House and Museum to discover the origin of Thai Silk. Other groups gathered and shared meals together while some simply hung around the hotel to study, read and rest in preparation for the flight back to the states.

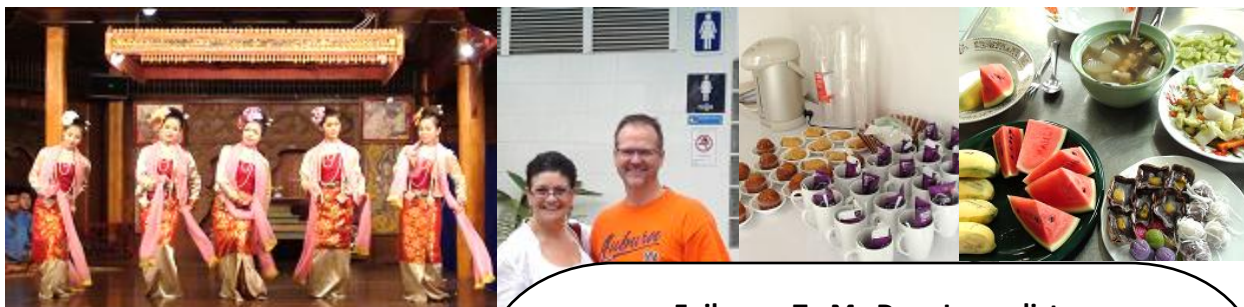
The last three weeks in Thailand have been an amazing journey. I believe that I can speak for the entire group when I say that it was indeed a journey. After all our eyes have seen, our ears have heard and our hearts have felt, my hope and prayer is that our journey does not end here.



I, like many, am leaving Thailand with a great sense of responsibility. I am leaving Thailand with the hope of not allowing myself to take the experience for granted. It would be a dreadful occurrence if I or any other traveler were to walk away from this experience and not ask, "What should I do next?" What should I do when I think of those displaced from their homes in Burma or the children there who have to drop out of school at such an early age to go to work in order to help support their families financially? What do I do when I remember those who at such a young age are lured into working in the Sex Trade? What do I do to honor those who have already lost their lives and for those who are living and are undiagnosed with HIV/AIDS?

Although some of what I need to do is undiscovered at this point, it remains a fact that whether in the US or abroad, I/we must do something. Having the Cross-Cultural Experience with my Lancaster Seminary peers and those I was recently acquainted with from the Southeast Conference, UCC was most memorable and life changing. I trust that we will all return to our respective homes with new insight and a renewed zeal to work for justice in and around our various communities.





### Epilogue: To My Dear Journalists

Job well done, everyone! I relived our amazing voyage editing this group journal. As I remembered the laughter and tears we shared, I thought, "There are nearly 7 billion people on earth; what are the chances of partaking an unforgettable journey of a lifetime with 16+ specific individuals?" I'd have to say that you are— our relationship is—very special to me.

I hope this journal will allow you to recall the special moments we shared in times to come. I trust that we all have expanded our consciousness with greater awareness and insight about God, the world and people. Sure, we don't have all the answers, but we are empowered by such enlightenment. So let us go forth—with a smile to make a difference today. Peace to you all, Sarah Kim ☺

